Editorial #5

Is there a gay bias in queer studies?



Fig. 1: Marcel Moore, *Aveux non Avenus,* 1930.

Our original plan was to devote this issue of *InterAlia* to non-heterosexual women whose voices, we felt, were (again) becoming less audible. We wished to invite perspectives and subjects which tend to fade into the background in academic conferences and theoretical debates concerning queer studies. Already the formulation of a topic in such a way as not to lead to further exclusions and so as to encourage participation from those thus far underrepresented in the journal proved to be a challenge. We decided to leave the area of exclusion un-mapped, so to speak, and instead asked the following questions under the broad rubric of "gay bias": If there is, indeed, such a predicament, is it limited to Central/Eastern Europe, where feminist, gender, gay, lesbian, and queer studies began to develop only in the 1990s? Are there assumptions or stylistics that appear transparent from the androcentric perspective that can be defamiliarized? Is there a language derived from women's experience which the current conventions of queer academic discourse make inaudible? Why do drag queens provoke a much greater stir and excitement than drag kings and how can we relate that to the norms of masculinity and femininity in everyday life? Are the social conventions governing the aging of women replicated in queer studies? If there are voices silenced within queer studies, what is it that they would tell us if they weren't limited by the existing language?



Fig. 2: Claude Cahoun and Marcel Moore, untitled, c. 1930.

Alas, our questions did not elicit the anticipated flood of responses. Instead, the issue slowly took shape around matters of concern to queer women; in short, it took on a life of its own. And while we are more than happy with the result, the question remains: why the fiasco of our original project? Are we to read the absence (with one or two exceptions) of responses to the original question as a resounding "no"?

Possibly our formulation of the problem itself was at fault. "Who is made (in)visible by the question "is there a gay bias in queer studies?," Claudia Koltzenburg asked pointedly. And indeed, transgendered, transsexual, intersexual, bisexual and a number of other perspectives, conditioned by economy and geography are also largely invisible in Polish debates on queer studies, and not merely because of the "gay bias." Yet, given our emphasis on the feminist corrective, the lack of response to our call for papers may in fact mean that the gap between queer studies and queer women's perspectives is even deeper than we expected.

There is no doubt that non-essentialist premises of queer studies make a "return" to identity categories, such as "gay" and "lesbian," somewhat anachronistic, particularly if structured as an opposition. Indeed, the language of queer studies does not seem to be amenable to definitions of identity which would allow us to spot and name the exclusions performed under its aegis. Does that mean that by identifying with the queer perspective we are deprived of the tools for dealing with a situation which obviously reproduces the pattern of "male privilege" (to take recourse to feminist terms)? Perhaps we should then more properly speak, as Tomasz Sikora has suggested, of a "masculinization" of queer discourse.

In Poland, both in its common and academic usage, the term "queer" is often used interchangeably with the terms "gay" and "lesbian" or as a way of referring to non-heterosexual people in general. And while to police the "purity" of the category queer would be to go

against its basic premise of non-exclusion, we do need to pay attention to how the term functions in Poland in academic discourse, in political activism, and in the broader public sphere. The Polish LGBT movement has acquired the "Q" suffix denoting the non-heteronormative subjects who do not identify with LGBT identity categories, but the suffix has paradoxically come to function as a type of synecdoche for LGBT on the strength, we suppose, of referring to a whole spectrum of identifications, as if it contained a little of all the LGBT component members. At the same time, as has been often pointed out, the movement often relies on the perspective of non-heterosexual men. Thus the charges about the continuing marginalization of lesbian, transsexual and intersexual subjects (notably addressed by such groups as "Transfuzja," and the support group for transsexual persons in Lambda) and even about the closeting of alternative sexualities with the use of the term "queer" which is simply foreign and thus obscure to the majority of Poles. Several authors have recently voiced their objections to the current use of the term "queer" in Polish discourse (see Wojciech Szot and Anna Laszuk in this issue) or even argued against the feasibility of the very concept in the Polish context.

The interchangeable usage of the categories "gay/lesbian" and "queer" is partly the result of the simultaneous adoption in Poland of terms which have had a history of development in the west where queer studies have been a logical outgrowth of gay and lesbian studies. This shift from essentialist definitions of identity toward social and cultural constructionism was part of a broader cultural shift realized also as a move away from essentialism in the studies on race or ethnicity toward more fluid, performative perspectives. Emphasis shifted from attempts to define identity (through forging genealogies, defining common histories, articulating common cultural traditions and validating or reclaiming what has been negatively construed as "other") to a deconstruction of identity as such and a positing of a more fluid, performative subject positions. While the former model works with binary oppositions (man/woman, white/black), the latter undermines them, articulating a model of being in the world contingent on a variety of modalities, fluid, performative, postidentitarian, hybrid, contextual. While the former model attempts to define/name "who/what we are," the later attends to "what we do." The former is a noun, while the later is a verb: we move from identity to relationality, interaction.

Those two models necessarily lead to very different types of political activity. LGBT organizations rally around the struggle, among others, for civil partnerships, for the rights and safety of LGBT persons and for the eradication of homophobia from social, political, cultural institutions and language. None of these aims have yet been achieved in Poland. Queer politics necessarily works with a very

different model. As Tomasz Sikora observed, one could hardly imagine a queer party (while an LGBT party could in fact exist):

On a more general level, we can envision queer politics as inherently subversive and destabilizing. I believe queer politics should be a politics of crisis, because crisis opens up new horizons, marks new directions, creates new parameters of identity. Queer politics aims at diversity not unification, advocates new types of social/political/sexual connections (that is, a type of hybridization) instead of established entities; finally, it is willing to risk a degree of (social/political/sexual) "illegibility" to provoke a cognitive crisis which may allow the creation of new forms of subjectivity and community.

Obviously, traditional political activism (which has an important role to play in contemporary Poland) can in fact never *represent the individual* ; it can only represent some identity category, which the activists can call upon (or effectively *call into being*). Queer theory marks the disparity, the gap, between individual experience and representation (in both senses of the term). In traditional politics, even in the arenas which are particularly sensitive to an individual, deciding on a position, demand, or postulate is a matter of negotiation of not only the given position, postulate, or demand, but often a negotiation of the very identity category those are to represent. Queer communities create, rather, a space of interaction-engagement or crisis-not so much among "individuals" even, as among varieties of subject positions. A queer community is possible, and it rests on the recognition that those subject positions come into being in relation to others. That is why it may be useful to think of "queer" as a verb, rather than a noun (hence Judith Butler's emphasis on performance): a process where relations are released which create us.

The different political models hastily sketched out above have been evolving in the west for at least 40 years (taking Stonewall as the beginning of gay and lesbian liberation, though obviously there existed earlier organizations, such as the lesbian Daughters of Bilitis, created in 1955) and have been conditioned by western political history which had no equivalent in Poland (importantly, Poland "missed" the sexual revolution of the sixties, the development of the feminist movement and its theorizations, but also has no such models to fall back on as the Civil Rights movement or the decolonization of the Third World). In Poland, the gay and lesbian and later LGBT movements were initiated 20 years ago and have a very different history, a different socio-political context and, therefore, a different dynamic. One of the most common Polish arguments against queer studies and queer politics is that, having originated in the hothouse of English-speaking countries, they are

out of place in our sharper (or more hostile) political climate. Western models may have limited applicability because of the powerful position of the Catholic church, the peculiar brand of Polish nationalism, as well as the specifically Polish modes of marginalizing due to social/cultural factors, class, and geography, all of which require a separate, engaged consideration. Still, western theorizations greatly influence the debates within and around the LGBT movement; they also inform Polish cultural studies. Queer *is* a foreign import, but so were potatoes, cell phones, or the words "lesbian" and "gay" all of which now seem indigenous to Polish culture.

What queer politics must not understate, however, is the urgent need of civil rights legislation for non-heterosexual people, nor the fact that the LBGTQ community tends to replicate the gender inequalities of the society at large. Some recent examples of the discrimination of nonheteronormative people in Poland suggest the continuing need for identitarian politics. In the spring of this year, a gay schoolteacher and queer studies scholar, whose paper was published on the University of Wroclaw queer studies group's website, was told by his director that he would lose his job if he did not drop his research interests and withdraw the paper from the site; the teacher asked the group not to intervene on his behalf. Gay and lesbian teachers have been sacked or induced to hand in their notice because they came out to their school community or worked as drag queens after hours. A Polish judge deprived a young lesbian mother of the custody of her child and entrusted the child to its grandmother, claiming that the latter would be a better influence. The daughter of two lesbian women was expelled from a Warsaw kindergarten. Fear of homophobia in schools and in the society at large keeps some lesbian women from having children at all. Reports of non-heterosexual people (usually men or trans people) being harassed and beaten in public places are still common.

The debate which preceded the 2009 LGBTQ parade in Warsaw and the opening of the discussion on queer politics and positions defined by the recently reactivated lesbian-feminist journal *Furia* all testify to the productive tensions resulting from the coexistence and interaction of those different political models on the Polish scene. Importantly for us and the topic of this issue of *InterAlia,* the subject of the disappearance of the perspective of nonheterosexual women has also appeared on the margins of the above debates and publications which thus provide an important, specifically Polish context for the problem we are trying to address. The discussion about the parade brought attention to the gay aesthetic which dominates the annual marches (it is gay club music and not Melissa Etheridge and k.d. lang that we listen to as we march). The parade was also unfavorably compared to the annual feminist Manifa,

a march where non-heterosexual women are in fact more visible (interestingly, it is at the feminist marches that one can see the banner with the portrait of Audre Lorde).

The lack of visibility of the lesbian has long been discussed and analyzed, also in relation to LGBT movements and queer theory. In her 1993 *The Apparitional Lesbian,* Terry Castle speaks of the "work of ghosting," which makes the lesbian either invisible or present as a type of phantom. Her example which opens the book is a movie scene with Greta Garbo, "a lesbian actress, portraying a notoriously lesbian queen, in one of the classic heterosexual love scenes in Hollywood."





Fig. 3 & 4: Stills of Greta Garbo

Odd as it was, "nobody seemed to notice," Castle points out. She calls for a "refocusing" on the lesbian, which, she believes, is made difficult not only by heterosexual homophobia, but also by the LGBT community itself:

We might call this kind on non-seeing a sort of ghosting through assimilation. As soon as the lesbian is lumped in-for better or for worse-with her male homosexual counterpart, the singularity of her experience (sexual and otherwise) tends to become obscured. We 'forget' about the lesbian by focusing instead on gay men. . . . Even among sophisticated and open-minded listeners, it was extremely difficult, I found, to keep the lesbian focus-so strong the collective reflex to shift back toward the topic of love between men, as if that, paradoxically, were somehow less peculiar or less threatening than love between women.

One of Castle's targets in her critique of the process of "ghosting" is queer theory. Referring to "queer" as a "pseudo-umbrella term" which is "currently fashionable" she believes that "[t]he term queer has become popular in activist and progressive academic circles in part . . . precisely because it makes it easy to enfold female homosexuality and disembody the lesbian once again." Castle sees Sedgwick's work up to date as an example of a "nervous avoidance of the topic of lesbianism" and Butler's problematization of the very idea of coming out as a lesbian (in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination") as a type of denial (Castle does not introduce Butler by name, referring to her as "one such critic, herself a lesbian"). In support of the claim that it is not at all unclear what is being "outed" when one "discloses" or "reveals" oneself as a lesbian and what "remains permanently concealed" (Butler), she quotes the definition of the word "lesbian" from the Webster Dictionary. And while it is more than problematic to argue that queer theory's popularity rests on the fact that it allows its subscribers to ghost the lesbian, Castle's commonsensical category of the lesbian

is nowhere more problematic than in the ghosting it performs itself when it forces all non-heterosexual women into the "lesbian" category whose meaning she feels to be "instantly clear" in "ordinary speech," or when she uses Radclyffe Hall as an unproblematic example of lesbianism. Related to the refusal to question the "lesbian" category is the refusal to question the category of "coming out," which is in fact very problematic not only as a type of "moral imperative" (certainly the belated coming out of Castle herself she speaks about in the book, that of an established scholar of one of the major American universities, can hardly serve as a model for a working class woman in a Midwestern small town), but also as an epistemological category (both Sedgwick and Butler have written about that).

Distant as it is (published 17 years ago), Castle's critique of queer theory marks a moment in the development of gay and lesbian studies in the US when the more traditional critical positions, grounded in essentialist definitions of the lesbian, were becoming more clearly opposed to those of queer theory (though, as her critics have pointed out, Castle does not in fact acknowledge the large body of academic work produced by the former). At the same time, unlike her opponents, Castle seems entirely unwilling to take up and critique the specific arguments proposed by Sedgwick, Butler or any other queer theorist, resorting to a commonsensical, empirical denial of the validity of their positions. In that she does not really advance the debate or offer a corrective in any way useful to queer theory itself.

Terry Castle's argument returns to us in the article by Polish journalist and editor Anna Laszuk who similarly advocates the usefulness of identity categories and sees the term "queer" in its Polish usage as apolitical, a pretext to withdraw on the "snobbish margin," an escape from reality. Laszuk comments on the fact that none of the Polish translations of the term caught on; consequently, in her view, "for the majority," it remains "a word without meaning, worse, a word which de-politicizes and can be deciphered only by the initiated." In fact the term is seen by Laszuk as unclear and destructive at the same time: "We don't need a word which hardly anyone understands, we don't need the dismantling of identities which have not had the time to establish themselves." Interestingly, Laszuk (similarly to Castle) believes in the moral imperative of coming-out (the word is actually frequently used by her in English). Laszuk sees the term "queer" as a pretext for barricading oneself in the ivory tower, a pursuit for privileged English-speaking scholars who have access to western periodicals and do not suffer the indignities or the frustrations known to the plain lesbian in the street.

Yet far from academia, in a Warsaw basement, the UFA collective

has been living and breathing queer air for several years. Their basement brings together people of all ages, genders and sexualities, around performances, workshops, demonstrations, theme parties, training courses, art exhibitions, book readings, film shows and many more (see article by Agnieszka Weseli in this issue). Clearly, then, queer activism functions in Poland apart from academia. Neither is academia cut off from the street: most salaried queer studies scholars are in one way or another engaged in traditional political activism: they routinely attend LGBT demonstrations, parades, debates, and performances; they bend institutional barriers to guarantee a safe space at universities for discussions of gender and sexuality; and they consistently react to homophobia. Contrary to those who rule out the possibility of queer politics (as no politics at all), Sikora insists that queer does stick out its neck precisely because it risks a certain amount of "illegibility" when it blurs social, political, and sexual categories. It does so not to evade commitment but to shake up old patterns of thinking so that we might be able to reimagine who we want to stand up for.

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The two authors whose articles open this issue belong to different generations and have very different backgrounds: **Anna Laszuk** is a Polish lesbian journalist committed to activating the lesbian community, for instance by publishing a volume of interviews titled *Girls, Come out of the Closet* and reviving the lesbian journal *Furia* . **Anne Harris** currently teaches at Victoria University in Australia; a playwright and stage director, she studied at NYU in the 1990s. Her "Back-Seat Girls: Where Do Dykes Sit with Queer Theory?" is the only article in this issue that directly addresses our original call for papers. Harris frames her analysis of the intersection of queer studies and gender with memories of a road trip she recently took with two gay men across the United States. Her reflections on the gender dynamics within the closed space of the car hurtling across the Midwest serve as a pretext for a trip back in time, to when Harris was a lesbian theatre artist in New York. The analysis moves back and forth between the partly pleasurable and partly disturbing "back-seat role" she found herself playing in the car and the far more disturbing memories of her attempts to "mainstream" lesbian theater in the 1990s-attempts misunderstood and thwarted by other lesbian artists/activists. "My back seat role," writes Harris, "cannot be easily dismissed as the men erasing or placing me. It resides partly within myself, and within the multiplicity of identities with which I was acting in relation to them, and to myself." Taking responsibility for not having voiced dissent from the back seat against patriarchal relations, Harris points out: "silence, like sexuality, is always performed and therefore always relational." Interestingly, the gay men who constitute the "mainstream" in the

article play supportive roles; Harris's confrontation is with the lesbians.

Anna Laszuk, in turn, addresses the contemporary situation of lesbians in Poland. Though many articles in the new issue of *Furia* she edited rely on queer theory, Laszuk strategically embraces identitarian politics as a solution to the invisibility of lesbians both in mainstream culture and within the LGBT movement. On a very different note, presenting the UFA collective in Warsaw **Agnieszka Weseli** also address the relevance of queer theory for nonheterosexual women's art and activism. In this self-reflexive paper, Weseli uses the strategy of negation to define the queer goals and principles embraced by the collective, so as not to limit UFA's meanings or exclude anyone who might have reason to join it.

Harris's paper reminds us how productive cross-gender alliances can be; this has also been our experience in editing the feminist issue of *InterAlia* . Not only have we received ample support from our male co-editors. Several "front-seat boys" have also demonstrated that they do see lesbians-or the fact of their erasure in the realms of art, literature, and film. Unprompted by our call for papers, the three male authors represented in this issue had been working on the figure of the "disappearing lesbian"; their research either exposes the mechanisms that have made that figure disappear in the past (Przemysław Szczur and William Glass) or looks at more recent times, when lesbian artists claimed a tenuous visibility (Paweł Leszkowicz). That tenuousness is apparent in the exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* that Leszkowicz is curating at the National Museum in Warsaw in the summer of 2010. Interviewed by *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Jan. 3, 2019), Leszkowicz makes it clear that it is the male nude (when characterized by a sensuous beauty) that stands at the center of the homoerotic convention in Western art. 18th-and 19th -century male-authored art representing women's homoeroticism, and art by contemporary lesbian artists, constitute a footnote to the exhibition. Necessarily so, Leszkowicz explains, since women were not admitted to art schools until the 1830s, and decades later schools used the presence of male models in the life-drawing class as a pretext for keeping women out. Meanwhile, however, lifelong art projects hatched outside art schools-Romaine Brooks, Marcel Moore, and Claude Cahun are just a handful of the women we are gradually coming to know through recovery and reinterpretation projects.



Fig. 5: Claude Cahun, 1894 -1954 (pseudonym of Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob), French artist, photographer, writer, activist. She produced much of her work in collaboration with her step-sister and life-long partner, French illustrator and designer, Marcel Moore, 1892-1972 (pseudonym of Suzanne Malherbe).

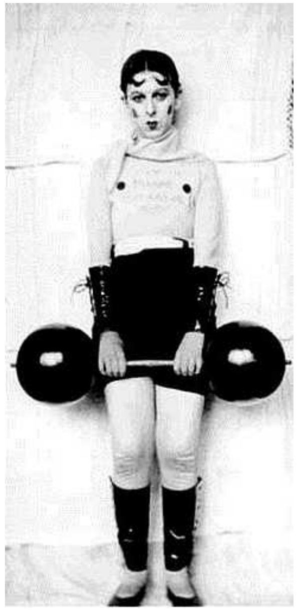


Fig. 6: Claude Cahun, *Don't Kiss Me I'm in Training,* 1927.

That they or other women artists will be absent from *Ars Homo Erotica* is probably more a function of institutional decisions (the stronger taboo on male homoeroticism is likely to draw larger crowds to the National Museum) than of Leszkowicz's gender bias: he has written extensively on lesbian art and is planning another exhibition to counterbalance this one. Nonetheless, the meaning of "homo" in *Ars Homo Erotica* seems to be closer to the popular use of that word in

Poland with male bodies in mind.

Hollywood's erasure of female homoeroticism under the 1930s Hays Code is the subject of **Will Glass's** essay on a series of mutations of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* . **Przemysław Szczur** , in turn, studies the forceful (if menacing) lesbian presence in 19th-century French lesbophobic literature such as Adolphe Belot's *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme,* to argue that, while women's homoeroticism was treated by Belot and Balzac as a threat to both masculinity and the state, such representations nonetheless made it visible, paving the way for non-homophobic literature on same-sex love in the 20th century. Homoerotic self-representations by two contemporary women artists are the subject of Paweł **Leszkowicz's essay** . Leszkowicz draws the Italian Gina Pane and the American Catherine Opie into the canon of queer homoerotic art by reading their body work through the icon of St. Sebastian.

Polish women are increasingly engaging in recovery projects, sometimes against the stance adopted by the subjects of their research-women who painstakingly constructed heterosexual public personas, and whose queerness may only be apparent from a present-day perspective (cf. Wanda Gertz or Maria Konopnicka discussed below). It may well be, however, that some of these women had not fully internalized homophobia and hoped for a world in which they, too, might be able to speak about their personal lives. Whereas in English-speaking countries the bulk of feminist projects to recover queer women's forgotten stories was carried out in the 1970-1990s, in Eastern/Central Europe such research has only just begun, and the emerging stories have their local specificity. Marzena Lizurej's research on the writer Narcyza Żmichowska, Izabela Filipiak's on transsexual poet Maria Komornicka/Piotr Włast Odmieniec (2007) and Krzysztof Tomasik's *Homobiografie* (2008) are groundbreaking work.









Fig. 7, 8, 9, 10: Photographs from a family album of one of the coeditors. Austria 1945. Young Polish women in a temporary camp where they ended up after several years spent in German labor camps. If the homosocial and possibly even homoerotic relations caught on film were conscious, they could not be continued outside the camp. Soon afterwards, all the women got married.

This issue of *InterAlia* includes three pieces of historical research and one video performance on queer women of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. **Iwona Dadej** studies German lesbians who headed the radical first-wave feminist movement. Her article explores the indispensable role of emotional bonds between women and mutual support networks for the development of German feminism and, simultaneously, the women's movement as a hothouse in which same-sex relations could flourish. **Anna Nowakowska** is the author of the book *Wanda Gertz. OpowieÂść o kobiecie żołnierzu* [Wanda Gertz: The Story of a Woman Soldier] (2009); her paper considers two of some thirty Polish women who fought in military uniform in World War I. Of their sexual lives little is known, other than that they never married; what Nowakowska's research brings out are the astounding ways in which some women broke out of the domestic sphere with wartime patriotism as both a heartfelt emotion and a pretext to act out non-normative gender roles. What the men in the army made of them is also part of Nowakowska's story. **Marzena Lizurej** , in turn, meditates on the changing reception of Maria Konopnicka, the once revered, then disdained, and now largely forgotten queer Polish positivist. Lizurej's piece introduces a video recording of Barbie Girls' spoof based on the fictional diary of Konopnicka, a woman who carefully concealed her desires from public view in order to style herself into a national hero. Rather than produce retouched portraits of exceptional women, all the authors/performers featured in this section pay close attention to the contextual (and and not

unproblematic) nature of their subjects' gender and sexual performances.

While the majority of the texts in this issue revolve around the representation of non-heterosexual subjects in the cultural sphere **Maria Skóra'** s work takes on the erasure of both gender and queer perspectives from economics theory. Her goal is to show the unconscious bias at the heart of economics, which leads to distortions in the image of reality generated by this discipline, and encourages discriminatory practices that have material consequences for queer people.

The topics and approaches represented here certainly do not exhaust the problem of marginalizations performed by queer theory as it is practiced in Poland; in future issues of *InterAlia* we hope to see more submissions that bring out the transsexual, intersexual, feminist, and lesbian perspectives, as well as critical analyses by writers from outside major urban centers.

We are deeply grateful to the Network of East-West Women, and Ann Snitow in particular, for providing a grant that enabled us to partially translate this issue. Unfortunately we were unable to make the issue fully bilingual, but we hope to do so in the future.



Fig. 11: Unsigned and undated photograph from a family album.

Dominika Ferens and Krystyna Mazur